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ABSTRACT

This is a summary of work done as part of a multiyear series of professional development engagements between staff in an urban school district and staff of the Urban Education Project at Research for Better Schools. The content section of this report describes the Urban Learner Framework (ULF), a model of the urban learner synthesized from research and theory by the project staff. The ULF conceptualizes the urban learner as capable, culturally diverse, motivated, and resilient, in contrast to the traditional view of the urban learner as deprived, underachieving, and at-risk. The engagement of project staff with a group of 32 teachers at an elementary school in the urban district is detailed. The process section describes what occurred in monthly meetings with the teachers and reports on the challenges faced as the project staff and teachers participated in dialog about the ULF. The outcomes section presents some reflections and opinions of the teachers. One figure describes the ULF. Contains a bibliography of 244 references that can inform the work of other educators interested in urban education. (SLD)

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INITIAL CORE TEAM INTERACTION WITH THE URBAN LEARNER FRAMEWORK: REFLECTIONS ON A PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT ENGAGEMENT

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1994

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Introduction

This is a summary of one segment of a multi-year series of professional development engagements between staff in an urban school district and staff of the Urban Education (UE) Project at Research for Better Schools (RBS). This summary grew out of an internal formative evaluation of our work. The lessons we learned have helped to shape our continuing work with these clients and has influenced the nature and scope of work with other clients. Our experiences may be of interest to other educators engaged in professional development or research in urban schools.

Following are detailed descriptions of the professional development engagement, organized by content, context, processes, outcomes, and implications. The content section describes the Urban Learner Framework (ULF) which has been synthesized from research and theory by the UE Project staff. The ULF challenges traditional educational assumptions and proposes a paradigm shift which served as the basis for the professional development engagements. The context section briefly describes the broad scope of our work in the district, then focuses primarily on a year-long engagement with a core team of staff in one elementary school in the district. The process section describes what we did in monthly meetings with the Core Team and our reflections about the challenges we faced as we engaged them in exploration and dialogue about the content. In the outcomes section, Core Team members' reflections on changes in their attitudes, beliefs, and behaviors were captured through vignettes in their own words. Lessons we learned are noted throughout the document. Implications of those lessons for our future work are outlined in the final section. This summary is accompanied by an extensive bibliography selected from the broad knowledge bases of culture, cognition, and change, from which the Urban Learner Framework was developed. Each of these descriptions can inform the work of other educators seeking to bring about change in urban schools.

The Content

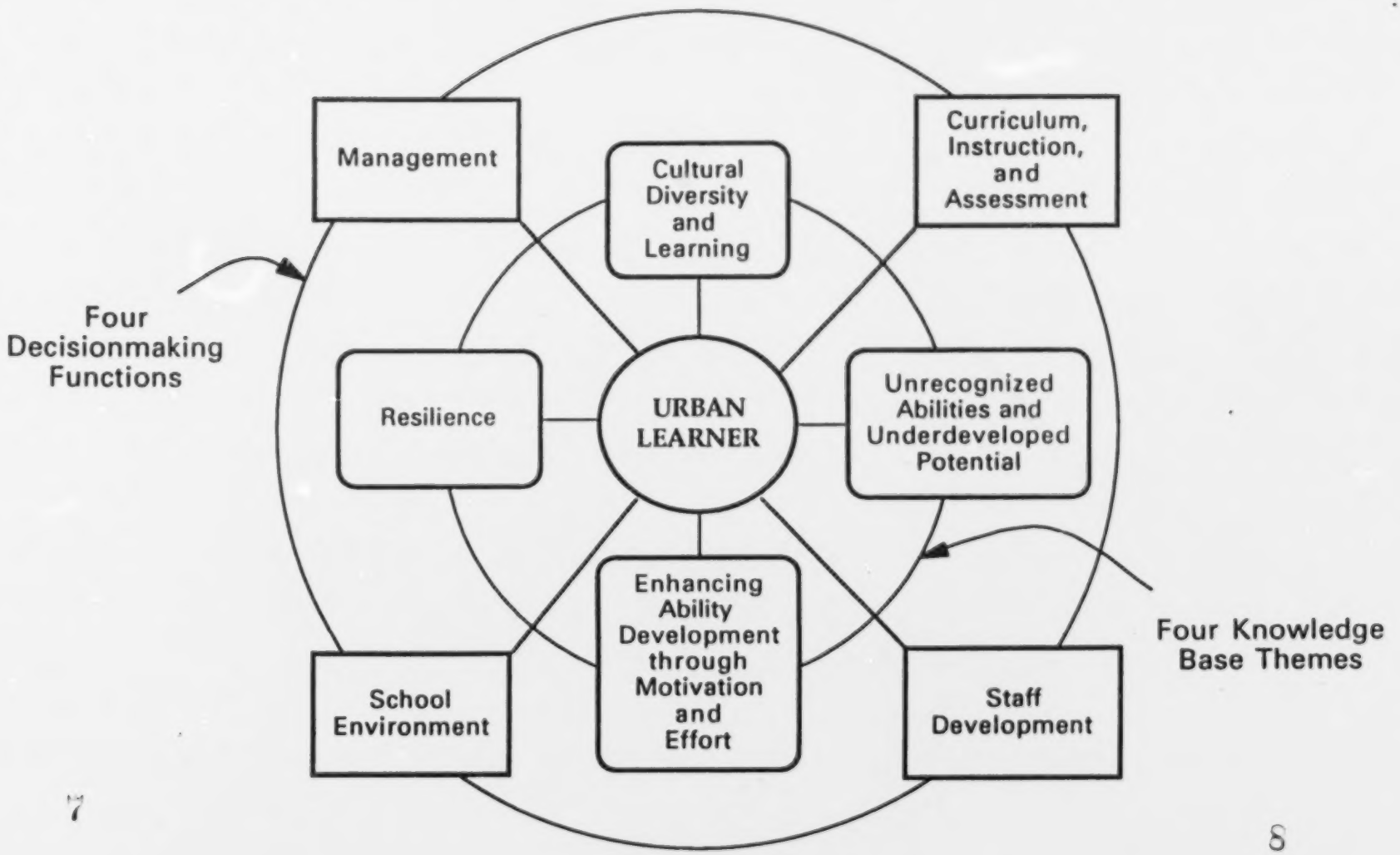
The Urban Learner Framework (ULF) is a conceptual framework synthesized by the UE Project staff, from knowledge bases we broadly categorized as culture (including ethnic and social factors) cognition (including cognitive and affective factors), and change (including individual motivation and effort and organizational factors). Figure 1 illustrates the components of the ULF. At the center of the framework is the learner, signifying the need to focus on the learner in every aspect of schooling. The Framework is organized into four themes and related to four broad functions of schooling. The four themes represent socio-cultural, cognitive, and affective domains which influence learning: (1) Cultural Diversity and Learning; (2) Unrecognized Abilities and Underdeveloped Potential; (3) Enhancing Ability Development through Motivation and Effort; (4) Resilience. The four broad functions of schooling represent areas of decisionmaking: (1) Curriculum, Instruction, and Assessment; (2) Staff Development; (3) School Environment; (4) Management. The ULF proposes a paradigm shift from a deficit perspective of urban learners to a strengths-based perspective.

We contend that decisions made in the functions influence and are influenced by how one views the learner. If one views the learner as culturally deprived, unable, unmotivated, failing, and peripheral to the enterprise of schooling, the decisions made in these functions reflect those perceptions. The working hypothesis of the UE staff is that if decisions in these functional areas are made with a focus on the learner, while duly considering the assumptions of the four themes, then resulting improvements in schooling will lead to greater numbers of children having more success in urban schools. Success is defined broadly as fulfillment of individual potential. The purpose of the ULF is to provide a decisionmaking tool for urban educators as they struggle with the challenge of restructuring schools to meet the needs of diverse populations of learners.

The ULF speaks to a perceived mismatch between schools and students whose racial, ethnic, language, and socio-economic backgrounds are outside mainstream American society.

Figure 1

URBAN LEARNER FRAMEWORK



This perceived mismatch is manifested clearly as a gap in achievement along racial/ethnic lines, documented in the National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP) report (Mullis, Dossey, Campbell, Gentile, O'Sullivan, & Latham, 1994). We postulate that this mismatch results in resistant student behaviors leading to disciplinary action, push-out and drop-out and disproportionate representation in special education and compensatory education programs. While the implications of this Framework for school change may apply to schools in general, the challenges of complex social and economic problems faced in urban areas caused UE Project staff to focus our attention on urban schools.

Themes of the ULF

In Theme 1, **Cultural Diversity and Learning**, the ULF challenges the assumption that American schools should serve to assimilate children into a monocultural society and that urban children do not possess cultural capital or assets that are of value in school. Valuing cultural diversity implies understanding the role of culture in learning. In a culturally pluralistic society, there are diverse perspectives about what knowledge is of most worth and there may be multiple and different ways of knowing identified. For example, one culture might value abstract, theoretical knowledge, while another values experiential knowledge. One cultural orientation might be toward learning in an analytical manner that focuses on isolated parts, while another cultural orientation might be toward learning in a relational manner that focuses on how parts relate to each other and to the whole. One culture might encourage individualistic, competitive learning activities, while another culture might prefer social, cooperative learning activities. The ULF advocates the assumption that culture (a group's shared history, knowledge, beliefs, values, norms, traditions, language, symbols, rituals, and interaction patterns) mediates learning, providing a frame of reference from which the learner makes meaning of new knowledge. The ULF advocates creating a bridge between the cultural capital children bring to school and the knowledge they require to survive and thrive in school and beyond. (See Astuto, Clark, Read, McGree, & Fernandez, 1994; Irvine, 1990; Vygotsky, 1978; Villegas, 1991; Ladson-Billings, 1990; Tharp, 1989.)

In Theme 2, **Unrecognized Abilities and Underdeveloped Potential**, the ULF challenges the assumption that intelligence is a single construct that can be measured only or chiefly by verbal and mathematical items on a paper-and-pencil test. The Framework also challenges the assumption that intelligence is genetically predetermined and fixed for life. When the knowledge and skills children bring to school do not coincide with what they are expected to know and be able to do at school, this mismatch sometimes is perceived as a lack of general intelligence. These children become sorted into categories that cause them to be labeled and treated as having low ability, with little or no potential to develop. As a consequence, children who are very capable in other settings are often rendered ineffective in school by such a self-fulfilling prophesy. Rather, the ULF suggests that intelligence is multifaceted, and that every individual can be characterized by a profile of multiple intelligences which can be modified by environmental influences. The ULF advocates pervasive, deliberate, and sustained efforts by schools to identify and ultimately to develop the potential abilities of every youngster. (See Herrnstein & Murray, 1994; Gardner, 1983; Feuerstein, 1990.)

In Theme 3, **Enhancing Ability Development Through Motivation and Effort**, the ULF challenges the assumption that extrinsic rewards are primary sources of motivation to learn and that errors are evidence of personal failure. While extrinsic rewards in the short term may produce a desired stimulus-response effect, lifelong learning depends upon intrinsic motivation. Individuals who attribute their success as directly and positively related to their own efforts, have greater reason to work hard. If they believe that they have low ability or that their success is due to some factor beyond their control, they have little motivation to work hard. The ULF advocates the position that intrinsic motivation increases when learners find their academic work personally relevant and their goal is deep understanding, rather than performing merely for grades or other external circumstances. The ULF suggests using errors as opportunities for students to explore and expand their thinking, stimulating effort by helping students connect academic work with interests that matter to them, and helping them see

relationships between their effort and learning outcomes. (See Ames, 1992; Alexander & Murphy, 1994; Stevenson & Stigler, 1992; Maehr & Midgley, 1991.)

In Theme 4, **Resilience**, the ULF challenges the assumption that students in urban schools are at-risk of failure, a view that raises a litany of "risk factors" which target a growing number of children for compensatory education programs. At issue here is a deficit model of educational characterization, a model that implies acceptance of the Darwinian concept of survival of the fittest. Such a model enables society to accept the loss of a generation of urban children as a natural, appropriate phenomenon. The ULF prefers the viewpoint that each child has the capacity to become resilient in a caring and supportive environment. Therefore, it is viewed as more productive to focus on "resiliency factors" (such as caring and support, high expectations, and meaningful participation) which enable some urban children to thrive and have a sense of future, despite the adversities that may threaten them. The ULF advocates institutionalizing practices and conditions that increase the number of resilient children by helping them develop coping strategies and protective mechanisms. (See Winfield, 1991, 1993; Benard, 1991; Rutter, 1987.)

The Functions of the ULF

In the **Curriculum, Instruction, and Assessment (CIA)** function, the ULF challenges the assumption that traditional forms of CIA serve all children equally well. CIA decisions consistent with the ULF position maintain high standards, while promoting culturally relevant curriculum and instruction and authentic assessment, that are likely to serve culturally diverse students better than traditional forms have served them. (See Astuto, et al, 1994; Moll, Amanti, Neff, & Gonzalez, 1992; Jones, 1993; Lomax, West, Harmon, Viator, & Madaus, 1992; Lazear, 1994.)

In the **Staff Development** function, the ULF challenges the assumption that prescriptive approaches serve to change individuals' attitudes, beliefs, or behaviors. Staff development decisions consistent with the ULF enable educators to set the agenda for their own development; engage them in inquiry,

reflection, and on-going professional dialogue; and enable them to exercise responsibility for changes in practice. In essence, the same heightened awareness of the strengths of urban learners is advocated for urban educators. (See Guskey, 1986; Kagan, 1992; Little, 1993; Schein, 1994; Sparks, 1994.)

In the **School Environment** function, the ULF challenges the assumption that the problems of schooling can be solved within the walls of the school. School environment decisions consistent with the ULF recognize that the school is an open system whose internal and external environments need to work in concert to bring about positive outcomes for children. (See Lannon-Kim, 1991; Sarason, 1990; Wehlage, Rutter, Smith, Lesko, & Fernandez, 1989.)

In the **Management** function, the ULF challenges the assumption that meaningful change can be mandated or dictated. Management decisions consistent with the ULF recognize that fundamental change is in order, and take the broad view that leadership includes a variety of stakeholders who are integrally involved in the change process. (See Conley, 1993; Fullan & Miles, 1992; Levy, 1986.)

We recognize that neither urban areas, schools, teachers, nor students are monolithic. Each represents a range of factors that combine to create greater or lesser degrees of effectiveness. For this reason we have not designed a one-size-fits-all ULF program or prescription, but instead we use the ULF as a tool to help educators co-construct strategies for change in practice.

The Context

During the 1992-93 school year the UE Project staff introduced the Urban Learner Framework to staff of an urban school district in New Jersey. According to school district sources, about 20,000 students are enrolled in the 30 public schools. Average per capita income is approximately $7,000. The population of about 87,000 is predominantly African-American and Latino, with a growing population of Southeast Asian immigrants, and a small proportion of European-Americans.

Our staff interacted with a group of 32 teachers designated as "Teacher Mentors" (TMs). The TMs were veteran teachers, most of whom had been teaching for at least 10 years. In the role of TM they

were released from classroom assignments to work full time, among other duties, assisting other teachers in their professional development. This group of TMs represented all 30 schools in the district. Our work with the TMs that first year occurred in five "train-the-trainer" awareness sessions in which they were introduced to the content of the ULF through structured experiences, and received direction and support materials to help facilitate interactive sessions they conducted in their schools. Subsequently, the TMs introduced the same content to faculty and staff in their schools, using the structured experiences as modeled or modifying those experiences to suit their circumstances. The Central Office designated four district-wide in-service half-days during which school was dismissed, to enable every school to participate fully in the awareness sessions conducted by TMs. As a follow-up, TMs were asked to identify in their schools' Educational Improvement Plan (EIP), how staff intended to move forward learning more about the ULF knowledge bases.

The district-wide effort continued during the 1993-94 school year with exploration and dialogue about the ULF in greater depth at TM professional development sessions. The TMs, in turn, worked with a core team of 3-20 teachers in their designated schools. The emphases of the monthly interactive sessions in the second year were on Multiple Intelligences (MI), a strand from the cognition knowledge base of the ULF, and Learner Experience (LE) a strand from the cultural knowledge base. The MI strand involved reading about and discussing various types of intelligence (e.g., verbal/linguistic; logical/mathematical; kinesthetic; musical; visual/spatial; interpersonal; intrapersonal), then observing a student to see evidence of the variety of intelligences he/she brings to learning tasks. The LE strand involved reading about and discussing issues related to making instruction relevant to children from diverse cultures, gathering information about the out-of-school experiences of children, and using that information to create a bridge to curriculum content. Both of these sets of activities were intended to help teachers see the strengths students bring to school, that can be drawn upon to help them become more successful in school. During that year, we referred to the two emphases as "going the extra MILE." Our goal in choosing these two strands was to gain deeper, concrete understanding of aspects of

the two knowledge bases and to begin to discover how this joint understanding could change classroom practice.

In addition to working with the 32 TMs in the second year, we decided to respond to the request of one TM and principal to work directly with their elementary school to help implement their EIP. This was one of the larger elementary (K-6) schools in the district, with approximately 1,000 students. The ethnic composition of the school was approximately 65% African-American, 30% Latino, and 5% Asian and European-American. The Asian students were recent immigrants, primarily from Vietnam and Cambodia. We saw this as an opportunity to get closer to the action in the school and to obtain direct feedback from the practitioners who were trying to use the concepts of the ULF to change their practice.

We encouraged the school leaders to invite volunteers to participate on a core team which would invest time in exploration and dialogue about the ULF in reference to their school context. The 16-member Core Team in this school was comprised of nine classroom teachers, the TM (Core Team Leader), the three building administrators, two community-school coordinators, and the library/media specialist. The teachers represented grades K-6, with two teachers each from first and fourth grades. The Core Team met monthly with two to four members of our staff. The following section describes the process we used to facilitate Core Team sessions, the challenges we faced, and the lessons we learned through feedback from the Core Team.

The Process

Prior to beginning the engagement with the Core Team we had two planning sessions in the summer with the TM and the administrators and a third planning session in early September with all the Core Team members who were on board at that time. The community-school coordinators and one teacher joined the Core Team later, in time for the first session. Through creative scheduling by the principal and the cooperation of instructional assistants and other staff, the Core Team was released for one afternoon a month from September to May, in order to participate with us. This was a formidable

challenge in a school of 1,000 students in grades K-6. Supervision of students in the teachers' classes went very smoothly, so that they were able to participate fully without interruption. The administrators, on the other hand, were not able to participate without interruption. Their determination notwithstanding, each one sometimes had to miss part of a session. They indicated that this inhibited their ability to feel connected at times. One administrator expressed, "I felt that I was always playing catch-up with the ideas that were going on and trying to fit in what had happened when I wasn't there. I was almost wishing that it wasn't at our school so we could meet without me being pulled out or something happening. . ." Never-the-less, the full support of the leadership team was evident throughout our work.

The Core Team was encouraged to take an inquiry approach to the ULF, using a "4-D cycle" of dialogue-design-do-debrief, invented by UE Project staff. The "dialogue" engaged the Core Team in examination of current professional literature from the knowledge bases that support the ULF themes. The "design" phase focused on what was to happen next, including what the Core Team was to do on their own and what would occur in the next session. The "do" phase encouraged Core Team members to use ideas that resonated with them to change some aspect of their practice. The "debrief" phase included sharing observations and reflections about changes in practice. It was our hope that each member would begin to surface his/her own data (observe and document evidence) to confirm or disconfirm the research and theory of the ULF in their own context. Our premise was that any change in their attitudes, beliefs, or behaviors would depend on them seeing their students from a strengths-based perspective. The biggest challenges were associated with the dialogue, design, and do phases.

The challenge of the dialogue phase was that we on the UE Project staff sometimes found ourselves too deeply in the presentation mode, which lessened opportunities for genuine dialogue. We attributed this to the fact that we were still in transition from the traditional "outside expert" staff development model to the collegial model we were trying to demonstrate. We also realized that the Core Team was more comfortable with the traditional model, so they were not able to hold our feet to the fire. The tension we faced was striking a balance between an afternoon filled with rich, thought-provoking

interaction or an afternoon of rambling conversation. Our fear was having the sessions perceived as a waste of time. We were gratified that as time passed, Core Team members became more assertive in expressing ideas and in raising critical questions of each other and of us during the sessions. By the end of the year we were closer to genuine dialogue than we were at the beginning.

The challenge of the design phase was to enable the Core Team to plan for activities they would do on their own between sessions, drawing upon their new knowledge. Our own differing views about what this meant in the context of their day-to-day realities, sent mixed messages to some Core Team members. Their expectations of our role and their role also created ambiguity, in that some of them expected us to be more directive than we thought we should be. In addition, it became evident that each individual needed time away from the session to process new information and determine how to try to use it in his/her own situation. We handled this challenge by not forcing the issue.

The biggest challenge was in the do phase. Since we brought a conceptual framework rather than a prescribed program, what to do was not clear cut. There was an added complication in that some of the teachers were committed to a prescribed program of Direct Instruction (DI) and they found it hard to "marry" the learner-centered concepts of the ULF with the content/process-centered approach of DI. Several of them were very creative in applying their understanding of the ULF in their own way. However, when we asked them to work on a specific task, there was difficulty. For example, when we asked teachers to draw upon "learner experience" in a lesson they planned to teach, they expressed a need for specific guidance beyond the dialogues. A few stated a need to jointly deconstruct then co-construct a textbook lesson. Others stated a need to become more deeply grounded in the conceptual framework. It became evident that there was lack of clarity about the concept of learner experience as well as about the task of using it in a lesson. At that point we chose the path of deeper grounding in the conceptual framework, based on the belief that deeper conceptual understanding would support meaningful, thoughtful, reflective application to the task. We learned that a combination of the concrete and the conceptual would have been more satisfying to the Core Team as a whole.

The debrief phase was least challenging because Core Team members were willing to share their victories, insights, and struggles. For example, one person modified the disciplinary referral form to include a statement from the teacher that identifies a strength of the child (despite the infraction for which he/she was being referred). Another person arrived at the second session with a replica of the ULF diagram, showing the urban teacher at the center. He had gained insight that the four themes applied to teachers as well as learners, pointing out that urban teachers strengths' are often overlooked. That same person later described the struggle of coming to terms with the idea that his ways of knowing and learning were in contrast with some of his students' ways of knowing and learning, which had significant implications for his teaching. A third person reported profound insight when she discovered that a child who had been unsuccessful with arithmetic in the abstract, suddenly became competent when she was allowed to use her own kinesthetic and tactile methods to solve problems. Above all, Core Team members began to validate or modify their belief systems and to articulate implications of the ULF for their roles. We learned that it was too ambitious to expect to complete the full 4-D cycle in each session. In retrospect it became clear that the early sessions needed more emphasis on dialogue, while later sessions needed more time on designing and debriefing.

Outcomes

At the end of the school year Core Team members were asked to share their reflections by writing vignettes. We adapted this qualitative research method described by Miles in his report of work with teachers in New York City. "Vignettes as we defined them are essentially snapshots---or perhaps mini-movies---of professional practice. They engage the professional directly in reflecting on a recent episode of practice---first describing it, then producing thoughtful explanations" (Miles,1987, p. 2). The purpose of the vignettes was to gather information about Core Team members' responses to the MILE sessions and about their attempts to apply their learnings to their work with students. The value of these vignettes is that they present the Core Team members' own voices, unmediated by researchers, who in

our case were also the session facilitators. Our adaptation of the vignette method involved a single vignette from each person, rather than successive vignettes over the course of the year. The written narratives were followed-up by tape recorded, one-on-one, confidential interviews with UE Project staff, for the purpose of clarification and elaboration. After we transcribed the interviews and analyzed the vignettes as a whole, we shared cross-cutting themes and provocative issues in a feedback session with the Core Team. Individual comments were kept in the strictest confidence. The information we gathered from the vignette narratives, interviews, and feedback session served as formative evaluation to guide our continuing interaction in the following year with the Core Team. The following excerpts from some of the vignettes are included with the express written permission of the Core Team members whose experiences they represent.

One staff member wrote passionately about her attitude toward students and described how her interpretation of the ULF affirmed that attitude.

> Unless you understand something, you can't care for it. For some reason, this statement says the why of my passion about the ULF. The ULF is my vehicle and this statement is the force that drives me and has driven me for the last 25 years spent working with urban children.
>
> The above quote was made by a scientist studying the squirrel monkey in the Manu Biosphere Rain Forest Reserve in Peru [viewed on a public television program]. The fact that the reserve protects more species of plants and animals than any other place on earth is awesome. The fact that a teacher has under her protection for 10 months of a year so many interesting and complex individuals is also awesome. The responsibility for such a task is tremendous. After a lifetime in education, the number of children we have had the opportunity to 'protect,' by providing them with the means to survive in the world, to find a place in the world, and to find a sense of success in the world, causes me to constantly reflect on my ability to understand and to know the urban learner.
>
> This quote and the knowledge I have gained from my sessions with RBS concerning the ULF causes me to reflect about the word, 'understanding.' For me, understanding means knowing how the learner learns and why the learner learns in a particular way. Understanding means having a knowledge about how the learner actually developed and lives in [his/her] world. Understanding means knowing what particular or specific strategies are needed to ensure that the learner continues to develop and thrive.
>
> Understanding means having the ability to accept the learner. It means not perceiving the learner as needing to be a clone of you, the professional, or any other type in order to be viable. Understanding is knowing that there is a need for a supportive learning environment.

> Understanding heightens everything about being a teacher. It's about caring. It's the kind of caring that causes you to feel upset about your 'lowest' performers and their seeming lack of success in the academic world. Being a teacher is about caring that your children will become adults and that you want them to be active participants in the world, with meaningful lives.

In the follow-up interview this staff member was asked to give examples of how she demonstrates caring. She described her work in a beginning teacher's first grade classroom, teaching a lower performing reading group. ". . . I call them up one at a time and say, 'I know you can do this, so I really need you to try real hard.' And they do, they really do. They've improved and the classroom teacher has said that he has seen an improvement in them, but they require a lot of stroking. . ." This staff member was asked to reflect on the experience by tying it to the ULF. ". . . I would say this is underdeveloped potential and enhancing development through motivation and effort. . . Sometimes they just look at me and it's like, 'I know how to read!'. . . They're shocked at what they produce from time to time. . . It surprises them. And the smiles on their faces when I say, 'You did a great job reading today...' It's just so nice!" For this staff member, learning about the research and theory represented in the ULF served to make the implicit explicit and the intuitive conscious. We believe we learned as much from her as she learned from us.

The narrative of one teacher illustrates a change in her behavior after becoming aware that her second grade students' ways of learning might be different from what her way of teaching required.

> I have a slow group of children in my room. These children are in a first grade reading series. They were having a great deal of trouble doing my board work and other classroom assignments. In this situation the children were dispersed around the class. I found that while I was having my reading groups especially, these children were whispering across the class to each other for help. This happened every time I returned my attention to the reading group at hand. . . During an RBS session, a thought bloomed. I decided to run with it. Why not put these children [the 'Rangers'] in a 'group' of their own and allow them to talk (whisper) to each other when they needed help. I tried it. I explained to the the class that I was trying an experiment. . . The rest of the class was a little relieved, I think. They were no longer bothered by constant interruptions of children in this group. The Rangers took right to it. For the most part they help each other with the work. Some children are better than others at different assignments. I see them 'pool' their knowledge daily. The children in the group as a whole are happier. They seem to feel better about themselves. They socialize more, they smile more. . . The Rangers' [classroom test] scores have come up for the most

> part. A few students have not changed drastically but there are eight in the group. All their grades have improved somewhat. . .

In the follow-up interview this teacher was prompted to reflect on that experience in reference to how learner experience with cultural interaction patterns influence their ways of learning. In response she stated,

> The whole group is so multi-cultural that it doesn't have anything to do with the learner experience. I have all three of the common groups in the school, Asians, African-Americans and Hispanics. They are all in that group and they all work together. Some of them clash at times. There are times when they argue and they don't want to work together. Somebody will offer help and somebody else won't want it, but for the most part they generally help each other out. . . Each child brings his/her background knowledge and ways of learning to the group. If one tries to explain and it doesn't work, another jumps in with his/her ideas and perceptions to see if he/she can help.

We learned that it is imperative to facilitate the process of having practitioners surface their own data and interpret those data in ways that help them gain a deeper understanding of their students.

One administrator wrote about changes in her approach to her role. In the follow-up interview she was asked to elaborate. She described how the comments of a teacher in a Core Team session caused her to change her practice. (The teacher whose vignette appears above had shared the experience during debriefing in one session.) The administrator stated,

> . . . When the child talks a lot or interacts a lot, it can be good. With that in mind the teacher had the children who were slow in certain skills work together. One child was good in one thing and another good in another thing. . . I think as an administrator, I can walk in a classroom and look for quiet. What we have to keep in mind is that children are learning in different ways and that helps me with observations. If I go in there and certain children are doing things that I am not accustomed to them doing, I must adjust. I have started doing some pre-observations. I go in and do a pre-observation before a formal observation to get an idea of what's going on in a particular classroom.

When asked to elaborate on the connection between this change in behavior and concepts we were addressing in the sessions, this administrator expressed a sense of disconnection from the content, as a result of having to miss parts of several sessions. We learned that it is important to help each member make explicit connections between the content and his/her role, so that he/she feels a sense of continuity.

During the sessions it became apparent to us that something was not working for one of the teachers. In her vignette she wrote,

> Within the classroom I am trying to focus on the children when introducing new concepts and skills. I want to know what knowledge the children already have before teaching new concepts; therefore, I spend a great deal of time in class discussion. These discussions allow me the opportunity to know my students better. The children talk about their families and experiences they have had within the community. These discussions also enable the students to know each other better.

Reading between the lines we took this to mean that she had been doing this before our sessions. In the follow-up interview we probed to find out if this interpretation was correct, if there was anything the sessions had added, and what was not working for her.

> Well, to be honest with you, I haven't changed any of my teaching styles since I've been working with the Core Team. I have been a little bit more aware of different cultures. . . I have always been concerned and caring about the children. I have always been one to over-extend myself into whatever is necessary to bring the child back into focus. . . The only thing I can really draw from the articles I read, is that they made me more sensitive to Asian children. Toward Hispanic children and African American children, I have always been sensitive.

We inferred that we had neglected to acknowledge the "learner experience" that this teacher brought to the sessions. In neglecting to do so, we inadvertently conveyed the impression that what she was already doing was not valued. We believe that this heightened the perception she revealed later in the interview of not having much choice in whether and when to participate. We learned to be more attentive to signs of discontent and to help make it safe for participants to exercise options.

Another teacher wrote vividly about her attempt at using learner experience with her first graders.

> Shortly after our October meeting I began to feel that I should be attempting to utilize 'learner experience' in some way. We were reading a series of books about families. We had just read ***The Relatives Came,*** written by Cynthia Rylant. A language objective for the district is for students to identify [adjectives], the describing words in a given sentence. Normally this would be done by showing five sentences with describing words such as: The blue hat is mine. It is a sunny day, etc. After several MILE meetings, and the fact that we had begun this great series of books, I decided to approach it differently.
>
> It was before Thanksgiving and we had just read the previously mentioned book. The book tells of the pros and cons of family visits, as one family from Virginia visits relatives in another state. The children were anxious to tell me about their family visits. I don't know what happened after that, but the lesson took on a life of its own. First we began talking about relatives in other states; then it turned out that some of those

> relatives were either visiting for Thanksgiving or the children were going to visit them. We made a list of Thanksgiving plans -- who the children were having dinner with and where. Some relatives were out of state, some were within the state, but I didn't focus on that at this time. [The next day] I made an overhead [transparency] of a map of the United States, and a matching copy for each student. We found New Jersey and colored it lightly. We then proceeded to find the locations of their visits one-by-one. The children were very excited as we marked each location. Visually they could see which cities were in New Jersey and which were in other states. When we finished I pointed to different locations and asked, 'Is this New Jersey or a different state?' . . . Each and every one can find the state of New Jersey on the map. . .
>
> After finding New Jersey on the map, we went on to the original objective -- describing words. I asked the children to think of their favorite relative. Then I asked them to describe that relative to me in such a way that if their relative walked through the door I would immediately recognize him [or her]... Then I let them either write about or draw their favorite relative. If they were going to draw I made it clear that I needed to see their descriptions in the picture. . . Although they were still sitting in rows (after one more MILE meeting I arranged my class in groups), I allowed them to walk around and talk freely during the lesson. The descriptions were vivid and there was a lot of excitement. I also told them to tell why this person was their favorite relative. I wondered during the chaos whether they remembered anything from the lesson. When I called time, I felt we each should know something new about someone else in the classroom. I gave two examples and then they joined in. Each person was indeed able to tell something about almost anyone in the class. There was a great sense of having been heard. It was as if every sentence that had been uttered during the chaos was registered as important, most probably, because to them it was important. Nothing went unnoticed or unheard. Every single child raised his [or her] hand and contributed. We were still a relatively new class and I think it was a kind of bonding experience. We also had a great starting point to jump into describing words. They were introduced not just to isolated describing words, but [to] how valuable they could be when used in writing or drawing.
>
> I know I wouldn't have approached this lesson in the same way if not for MILE. Whether it seems important or not, may be because it was just one of those things that you had to be there. It was so exciting and the children were so very deeply involved. I felt very good when the day was over.

In the follow-up interview this teacher reflected that, ". . . It was a culmination of the meetings and my feeling that I've got to somehow take a lesson from inside of them versus from the outside. . ." Later in the interview this teacher expressed uncertainty about her readiness to sustain the kind of teaching she described in her narrative.

> . . . I had said to another teacher that I felt I needed to say, 'I'm a little bit afraid'. . .
> This seems like it's going to be a lot of work. I mean that the whole thing was not one manual, not one book. . . Because of the work involved, I slipped back. . .

When asked what she would do if she had no constraints, she answered,

> I don't know, some of it is my own constraints. . . sometimes not knowing whether I want to go the extra mile. I don't want to act like it's all the district or it's all just us. Some of it is I don't know whether I'm ready to make this leap. . . and it's a feeling that I don't know if I'm creative enough. I don't think that I could tie it enough to the curriculum yet. What I'm doing is just taking pieces and saying, 'Okay, this could be good but what does it mean?' I don't even know if I went far enough at that, at the end. I did go right back to describing words in a sentence.

In questioning her own competence and commitment, this teacher was expressing the personal discomfort, anxiety, and uncertainty that any significant individual change engenders. We learned that it was important to make it safe for all participants to express similar feelings.

There were several cross-cutting themes and provocative issues that surfaced in our analysis of the vignettes. Several of them described changes in attitudes, beliefs, or behavior as a result of the sessions: lessons based on children's experiences; inclusion of student interests and activities in the classroom, in teachers' choice of films, bulletin boards, discussion topics, etc. Also discussed were changes in instruction to fit the variety of dispositions of students, and greater sensitivity to students. The vignettes suggested that there are multiple conceptions of culture among Core Team members. Some identified children's behaviors as synonymous with their culture. Several emphasized the importance of reinforcing the cultural awareness of the staff, but also expressed concern that the students are not stereotyped by race/ethnicity. Overall, there was a heightened awareness of the importance of culture and the need to learn more about different cultures and their complexity and to incorporate them into the daily life of the school. The cross-cutting themes suggest that Core Team members can be resources for other staff in applying the concepts of the ULF.

Implications and Conclusion

At the end of the year-long engagement we reflected on the many inputs we had from the Core Team, including their comments in sessions, their responses to informal surveys by the TM, and the vignettes. We learned many lessons that have implications for our future work with this school and with

other clients. Most of those lessons were stated previously, in contexts with which they were associated. The over-arching lesson had to do with our role as change agents. We learned that knowing where clients are on a continuum of change and their beliefs about how change occurs, are central to a decision about how to work with them. Well into the process we realized that Core Team members envisioned incremental, "first-order" change (modifying what was already in place) while the ULF implies "second-order" change (dramatic overhaul of school organization and practice that goes to the core of existing regularities). Implications for our future work include:

- exploring with clients their perceptions of the need for change
- initiating an authentic conversation about the ULF and second-order change, in which our clients' positions surface
- discussing clients' commitment to a change process
- exploring institutional impediments and supports for second-order change
- being more deliberate and explicit in affirming what clients are already doing that is consistent with our work, and using that as a starting point from which to help clients understand and apply the ULF in practice
- being as clear as possible about the commitment of time and effort, so that participation will be with informed consent
- helping school leaders find ways to involve their staffs in identifying participation options.

Our continuing work with the Core Team at this school will be guided by the lessons we learned from the first year.

In conclusion, the second year promises to be very exciting because a sub-group of the Core Team took the initiative to explore one aspect of the ULF knowledge base on their own. Over the summer the TM and three classroom teachers from the Core Team secured a grant to develop classroom activities focused on Multiple Intelligences. Although this is only one strand of the knowledge base, their effort represents a commitment to changes in practice. We asked the TM to survey the Core Team about how

we can support their efforts in the second year. With the exception of two teachers who chose not to continue participating, the Core Team expressed a definite need to continue meeting as a group. Five additional teachers and three instructional assistants expressed interest in joining the Core Team in the second year. The stated need to continue meeting will be supported through a request in the school's Educational Improvement Plan for funds from the school district to release the Core Team to meet one full day a month. We will support them by providing consultation and informational resources at those monthly meetings. They also expressed an intention to pilot the activities developed during the summer, which are available to all Core Team members. We will support them by helping them develop strategies for peer feedback based on classroom observations and by raising questions in the monthly sessions that help them to reflect on their practice. We also will help them find ways for non-teaching staff to become more active in supporting changes in the classroom. Despite the ups and downs of the first year, we were gratified that there was meaningful change and that there was a high level of interest in continuing exploration and dialogue about the Urban Learner Framework.

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ABOUT RESEARCH FOR BETTER SCHOOLS
and the
URBAN EDUCATION PROJECT

Research for Better Schools (RBS) is a private, non-profit, educational research and development firm. Our sponsors include many clients from the public and private sectors. RBS has been funded by the U.S. Department of Education to serve as the educational laboratory for the Mid-Atlantic region since 1966.

The present mission of the Urban Education Project builds upon the past experience of RBS. The Project seeks to initiate and support efforts to improve and restructure schooling in urban districts. Emphasis is placed on helping urban educators meet the diverse needs of students by improving instructional programs, organizational effectiveness, school accountability. These efforts reflect an integrated knowledge base which incorporates and disseminates the most current, promising, and pertinent research.

The Urban Learner Framework presents a *new vision of the urban learner* as culturally diverse, capable, motivated, and resilient (Bernal, 1980; Stevenson & Stigler, 1992; Tharp, 1989; and Winfield, 1991). This view represents a major paradigm shift in research and theories of intelligence, learning, and instruction that could lead to a new order of results for urban learners. The new view challenges former sweeping generalizations of urban learners as deprived, underachieving, unmotivated, and at-risk. It suggests that urban educators *build on strengths of the urban learner* by embracing change that utilizes research on cultural diversity and learning, unrecognized ability and underdeveloped potential, enhancing ability development through motivation and effort, and resilience. The Urban Education Framework is grounded in the belief that *focused educational change that gives special attention to urban learner issues* can heighten opportunities for students to achieve academic success and life-long productivity.

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